

BUDDHISM:
A Muslim
Primer

MOHD ELFIE NIESHAEM JUFERI

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In the Name of God, Most Gracious Most Merciful

I. PREFACE

In this modern age of the 21st century, enduring life has become a despair and too chaotic for some individuals to handle, especially in the West. This is primarily the reason why some laypeople, exposed to Western materialist thought for so long, eventually turn towards eastern mysticism and its various forms.

When looking at the Muslim world as a whole, we will find that Buddhism is largely ignored. As it does not have an organized missionary movement actively seeking converts in these countries as Christianity does, it is either not perceived as critically as the latter or is dismissed outright. Another reason is because since Buddhism is generally associated with idolatry (of which Islam uncompromisingly opposes), it loses its appeal amid Muslims. However, in recent times a diffusion of Buddhism is seen to exist in the secular West and it has quite a rapport following in the midst of its targeted society. But in order to make it more “acceptable” to its Western audience, the Buddhism as adopted in the West is somewhat a watered-down version when compared to how Buddhism is truly practiced in its bastion in the Far East.

Indeed, it is clear that as a belief, Buddhism is contrary to logic and intelligence. Countries where it has been adopted have mixed it with their own idolatrous ideas, traditions and local customs, joining it with myths and deviant ideas until it has evolved into a totally godless philosophy with varying and sometimes even contradictory interpretations. Contrast that to Islam, which has always held that

only religion is the way to conduct life on earth. To know the Creator is the Ultimate Truth that everyone should seek.

The author of this book is involved in the study of comparative religion in his spare time, and maintains several websites, including bismikaallahuma.org that focuses on Christianity and their polemics against Islam. He originally conceived the idea of this work during a short-lived discourse with a Buddhist missionary on the subject of comparative religion. The lack of material comparing Buddhist thought with Islam, an analysis of Buddhism from the Islamic perspective, as well as a refutation of the common perceptions that Buddhists generally have about their religious belief system, is glaring in Muslim literature. The author also firmly believes in the principle behind the Arabic adage, *al-kufri millatun wahidah* (all disbelief is the same, no matter the form), and this has been a powerful motivation for the author to dissect and analyze Buddhism as it is practiced today. Thus, among the objectives of this author is to fill in this “gap” left by Muslims, with the contents of this book, insha'allâh.

Keeping in mind the difficulty of grasping the subject matter by the general public, the author have ensured that this book is written in sincere and fluent language to ensure that everyone of every age and from every social group can easily understand it. Thanks to its effective, lucid narrative, it can be read at one sitting. Even those who rigorously reject spirituality will be influenced by the facts that this book has documented and cannot refute the truthfulness of its contents.

It is hoped that with the release of **Buddhism: A Muslim Primer**,

the Muslim public would be ideologically-equipped to confront or even challenge the misguided beliefs inherent within this religious belief system and its supporters. The author of this book is convinced that those who adhere to this belief system are living in ignorance and true Guidance for them will never be achieved unless they repent and return to total submission to the One True God, the Creator of us all. As the Qur'an itself implores,

"Your God is One God, so submit to Him." (Qur'an, 22:34)

II. SIDDHATTHA GOTAMA AND BUDDHISM

2.1 Brief Background on Buddhism

The religion with God is Islam... (Qur'an, 3:19)

Islam and Buddhism are two distinct religious traditions that provide their own meaningful responses to the fundamental questions about life. Their views on issues relating to the possibility of a Supreme Being, the purpose of life and their understanding of the cycle of life and death are all quite distinct from each other, but at the same time, having certain similarities. About 25 centuries ago, Buddhism arose in northeastern India¹ and, in time, extended its influence throughout the Indian continent, Southeast Asia and the Far East. Today, it is believed to have about 330 million followers in total all around the world.

The term **Buddhism** comes from the title “Buddha” (The Awakened One), attributed to one Prince Siddhattha Gotama² (d. *circa* 483BC), a native of the Himalayan region. Shaken by the presence of suffering in the world, he renounced everything to seek enlightenment. He gained enlightenment (*bodhi*) under a fig tree, sitting in the so-called Lotus position with his legs crossed. He gave his first discourse on the “Four Noble Truths”; that all is suffering, longing and desire are the origin of all suffering, absolute detachment from every form of desire is the destruction of suffering, and the way to attain this

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, pp. 263-264

² We have relied on the standardized Pali spelling used for the Buddha's name as adopted by *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, p. 263ff

destruction is the Eightfold Path (right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right concentration and right meditation). Certainly, rather than beginning as a religion, the Buddha had wanted to present an anthropological soteriology.

A specific description of Buddhism is intricate, mainly because its followers obtain varying beliefs or definitions about what consists of “Buddhism”. Some view it as one of the major world religions with the Buddha being upheld as a god; others see it as merely a philosophical way of life. There are also those who see Buddhism within an atheistic/agnostic framework to influence their perceptions of the world. Our opinion, however, remains that fundamentally, Buddhism was understood as an atheistic ideology that eventually evolved to include idolatrous and superstitious practices, and this can be seen today in Buddhist-majority nations such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

2.2 Buddhist Schools of Thought

Buddhism claims it has evolved into different forms so that it can be relevant to the different cultures in which it exists. They claim it has been reinterpreted over the centuries so that it can remain relevant to each new generation. It has to be relative to be relevant. Of course one would have to concede that there is very little “pure” Buddhism being practiced in the world today. Instead there is a mixture of Buddhism with Taoism and Confucianism. Taoism came from Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Confucianism is based upon the teachings of Confucius. During the Ming Dynasty (1369-1644 CE), these three were merged into one. Another aspect of this mixture is the practice of ancestor worship. People do not consider it odd to practice some

aspects of all three religions.

With time various schools or factions of Buddhism were formed. Of all these schools, the three major schools recognized and distinguished from the rest are as follows.

2.2.1 Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism (Great Vehicle) is the most widespread form of Buddhism in the world today. Its followers originate in China, Japan, Korea, and a decent portion of adherents in Vietnam and Taiwan. The way of the Mahayana, developed from the earlier and more austere Theravada school of Buddhism, tends to be characterized by a greater emphasis of the supernatural. Deity belief is present in the Mahayana doctrine of The Three Bodies (forms), or *Trikaya*, of the Buddha: (1) Body of Essence - the indescribable, impersonal Absolute Reality, or Ultimate Truth that is *nirvana*; (2) Body of Bliss or Enjoyment - Buddha as divine, deity, formless, celestial spirit with saving power of grace, omnipotence, omniscience; and (3) Body of Transformation or Emanation - an illusion or emanation in human form provided by the divine Buddha to guide humans to Enlightenment.³

One of the more surprising teachings of Mahayana Buddhism is the concept of the *boddhisatvas*, or human ancestors apotheosized into saviours, to redeem man from the affliction of existence. With this understanding, Buddhas can appear in whatever form is beneficial to sentient beings, and Buddhas need not necessarily be a Buddhist.

³ Beliefnet.com, [Buddhism](#) [Online Document]

For example, Taoism existed within China before the arrival of Buddhism, and metaphysically there are important distinctions between the two. However, the structure of Mahayana Buddhism allows it to simply absorb Taoists deities as other *bodhisattvas*. Similarly, it is common for practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism to regard Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad as simply other *bodhisattvas*, allowing those religions to fit within the context of Buddhism.⁴

2.2.2 Theraveda Buddhism

Theraveda Buddhism (Lesser Vehicle) is one of the earliest schools of Buddhism that developed in India during the century subsequent to the passing away of the Buddha. The name of the sect implies the meaning of “those supporting the teachings of the elders”, which means that this was a school that had conservative tendencies - an attempt to conserve the original teachings of the Buddha. The main goal of the Theravada is the achievement of *arahant* (lit. “worthy one”). In Theravada philosophy, each being is responsible for attaining *nirvana* independently, thus allowing himself to guide others efficiently. The discriminative term **Hinayana** (lit. ‘Inferior Vehicle’) thus came to be in opposition to Theravada by the followers of Mahayana where the popular belief is that *bodhisattvas* are eternal and should help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment.⁵

⁴ Wikipedia, [Mahayana Buddhism](#) [Online Document]

⁵ Wikipedia, [Theraveda Buddhism](#) [Online Document]

2.2.3 Vadshrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism

Also known as **Lamaism**, it was originally part of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, which underwent a peculiar transformation in the highlands of Tibet in 632 when it was first introduced. It is the result of encountering the native Bön religion, a form of Central Asian animism and shamanism, based on magic spells.⁶ The Bön religion still persists today in northern and southern Tibet. Magicians and exorcists were ‘protecting’ the people against fearsome demons with their incantations. Eventually these wizards became the Buddhist priests known as *lamas* (superiors). The practices that developed are known as Vadshrayana (Diamond Vehicle).

The lama hierarchy of Tibet has no counterpart in other forms of Buddhism. Tsong kha-pa (1356-1419) known as the man from the onion valley in eastern Tibet (from the Kumbun monastery) introduced celibacy because whole dynasties of monks developed and there was great degeneracy. He forbade alcohol and the practice of magic (which did not last long) and introduced the yellow robe and the begging bowl. The Dalai Lama is considered by Tibetan Buddhists as a living God, a pope-king. As *Bodhisattva* and savior as intermediary between this world and next he has both priestly and political functions and powers. Gods, goddesses, and rituals in Tibetan Buddhism have merged with frightful and obscene demons from the ancient Bön religion. Hence Tibetan Buddhism is just one of these many sects. It absorbed many elements from the Bön religion as well as reinterpreted the doctrines of Buddha so as to make a different ideology.

⁶ Wikipedia, [Tibetan Buddhism](#) [Online Document]

2.3 Buddhism's Holy Texts

All Buddhist schools hold a body of texts to be canonical in common, while each school may have canonical texts that are not recognized by the other schools. The common body of the canon varies slightly amongst the schools, because of differing chains of transmission, and also because the canon is written in whatever is considered to be the appropriate language for a particular culture. The canon is also open, meaning that texts may be added to it at any time. Thus, lack of recognition of canonicity of a text by a particular school does not necessarily imply deliberate rejection. The canon is not considered to be the product of revelation in Buddhism and thus it is not considered “holy” in the sense used in the Semitic faiths. However, the canon is regarded as a record of the words and actions of people esteemed to be “enlightened”, and is thus treated with a great deal of respect, possibly in an analogous fashion to how one might treat a holy text in other religious belief systems.

The earliest formation of Buddhist canons began at the earliest four centuries after the death of the Buddha. In the Tibetan canon, for example, some 500 volumes of Sanskrit translations and exegetic commentaries of Tibetan monks were accumulated. Only by the year 1300 CE was the Tibetan canon finally completed. Other canons, such as the Sanskrit and Pali canons for example, were translated into Chinese, but also includes works originally written in Chinese after the transmission of Buddhism to China, so it is larger than the original collection of Sanskrit and Pali texts.⁷

⁷ See [The Buddhist Canon](#) [Online Document]

Not all of the Buddhist text has been preserved. The great sutra, *Bhadrakalpika Sutra*, originally existed in Sanskrit, but this text has long since been lost and has come down to Buddhists today only in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. It is regarded as a Mahayana sutra. To also consider the Buddhist canon as analogous to the body of *ahadith*⁸ collection found in Islam is probably inaccurate, however, since there is no reliable science of *isnad* (chain of transmission) to trace an alleged teaching to its original source. We only have the *matn* (text) of the **alleged** sayings of Sidhatta Gotama, and attributed to him by the followers of the followers of Gotama. However, we would agree that the transmission and recording of Buddhist canon are only comparable of standard to the *ahadith* collections of Bukhari, Muslim and the other compilers of the tradition. This is because even in these *sahih*⁹ collections, there are *hadith* that can be scrutinized and rejected for its lack of *isnad*, as it is not wholly reliable. The transmission of Buddhist “scriptures” is certainly not on par with the transmission standards of the Qur’an itself, which has always remained as a single textual version¹⁰ used by Muslims all over the world.

A list of the Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan canons is given in the Appendix.

⁸ *Hadith* (pl. *ahadith*), literally meaning “a report” or “saying”, is a recorded tradition usually traced through a chain of narrators to the Prophet Muhammad (P) himself. See ‘Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Introduction to the Hadith* (A.S. Nordeen, 1991), p. 8ff.

⁹ The *Sahih* or *Sahih as-Sittah* comprises the six trustworthiest collections of Traditions compiled by Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Nasa’i and Ibn Majah. See ‘Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *ibid*.

¹⁰ On this point Muslim scholarship is unanimously in agreement. To those who are not familiar with this longstanding tradition, suffice it to warn that the situation of hermeneutical despair and confusion which exists in the case of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and other scriptures has absolutely no parallel in Islam.

III. BUDDHIST WORSHIP & IDOLATRY

That is God, your Lord, the Truth, and what is there after truth except misguidance? So how have you been distracted? (Qur'an, 10:32)

Islam acknowledges that in the past, God had sent messengers to their various tribes and peoples in order to teach them the existence of the Creator. Thus, though each prophet brought a message in the language of his people¹¹, these messages differ from each other in certain commands, *ahkam* and laws; the central message remains the same. Hence all Muslims profess the existence of the One and Only God, God Almighty who is also referred to in Arabic as '*Allah*'. They firmly believe that *Allah* is the Most High and honored, the Creator and the Sustainer of all that exists and he has no physical connections between any thing He has created whether it is the creatures or human beings on this earth. He has no beginning and no end. *Allah* has no physical dimensions like hunger, sleep or rest for He is the one who gives such attributes to his creatures.

In previous chapters, we have reiterated that Buddhism is, in most part, an atheistic religion that lacks any belief in God. Yet to claim **wholesale** that Buddhists totally reject the notion of a deity is inaccurate. The Mahayana school certainly employs the idea of deity or deities in form of the *Trikaya* doctrine, and Tibetan Buddhism expanded on the idea of 'reincarnated godhood' in the form of

¹¹ "We have never sent a Messenger save with the language of his own people" (Qur'an, 14:4)

bodddhisatvas. It is in fact known that even the so-called “atheistic” Buddhists who hold to the natural ideology of Buddhism habitually bow towards the image of the Buddha. Whether they would want to call it as mere “reverence” in order to downplay their idolatry towards a piece of stone, gold or clay is irrelevant at this point of time. The fact remains that even if Buddhism does not openly encourage idolatry, it certainly does nothing to diffuse or to discredit it.

It is in fact true that idolatry in Buddhism has become part and parcel of the “religion”. This surge of devotion to exalt the Buddha is rooted in the practice of personal devotion, known as *bhakti*, which is expressed as a perennial human yearning for humanized religion.¹² At the death of Siddhatta Gotama around the end of the sixth century BCE, people naturally wanted a memento of him but did not feel that a statue was appropriate since he no longer “existed” in any normal sense in *nirvana*. However, the personal love for the Buddha developed over the course of time, so strong that in the first century BCE the first statues appeared at Gandhara in northwest India and Mathura on the Jumna River.¹³

The concept of *bhakti* (devotion) permeates every façade of Buddhism’s various schools. In Tibetan Buddhism, for example, the position of Dalai Lama (mighty lama or ocean of wisdom) is equivalent to that of a reincarnated god. Hence the reinterpretation of the doctrine of the *bodhisattva*: when a Buddha died, his successor must be sought among children born in the hour he died. Once found, he was proclaimed the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The new

¹² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 83

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 84ff.

‘god’ must be a male boy, chosen by the laws of Chubilganic succession (transformation by reincarnation). Families of no great prestige are favored so as not to have excessive influence from his relatives on the new Dalai Lama. Obviously the finding of the boy by a procedure with remnants of shamanistic, pre-Buddhist beliefs and his training and education gives enormous power and influence in the hands of the clergy who are in charge of him. However, the majority of Buddhists outside Tibet merely takes the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader and generally do not consider the Dalai Lama a god.

Given that how the choice of the Dalai Lama rests in the hands of the powerful clergy, it is no wonder why Islam shuns the concept of clerics and priests. Even today, there is no priesthood in Islam and the exclusive interpretation of the sacred tenets of Islamic doctrine does not solely rest in the hands of a few.

In Malaysia, Buddhist worship involves paying homage to the image of the Buddha, chanting and meditation is done twice a day in private or in the temples. Homage is paid to the Buddha’s image by folding one’s palms with reverence and holding them burnt on an ‘altar’ and flowers are offered to remind the Buddhist that all human beings will decay.¹⁴ Chinese Buddhists also worship the Pagoda where Buddha’s relic (*sarivika*) is enshrined. Moreover they pay homage to the *bodhia* tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ahmad F. Yousif, *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam*, p. 66

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

IV. BUDDHIST SOTERIOLOGY & ESCHATOLOGY

“If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him, and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost.” (Qur’an, 3:85)

The basic belief as taught in Buddhist soteriology is that desire is the root cause of all suffering. Salvation will thus be achieved only when all human passions have been extinguished, particularly the craving for existence. Eventually, according to Buddhist belief, enlightenment was humanity’s proper destiny¹⁶, experienced only when the necessary moral and mental exercises had been undertaken. When man dies, he is “reborn” into a different form, and this goes on until he achieves the state of *nirvana*. In Sanskrit, *nirvana* literally means, “extinguishing, blowing out”¹⁷; once man achieves a state of *nirvana*, he would never have to be reborn. Hence it is such that *nirvana* becomes the ultimate goal of spiritual practice in Buddhism, as it is seen as the total, absolute and permanent cessation of suffering.

Buddhism also teaches that happiness or suffering in this life is the result of deeds (*karma*) in past lives or past actions in our present lives. *Karma* is “intentional action”, that is, a deed done deliberately through body, speech, or mind. The effects of *karma* may be evident either in short-term or in the long-term. It can either manifest its effects in this very life or in the next life or only after several lives.

¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129

¹⁷ See [Buddhist Philosophy: Nirvana](#) [Online Document]

Karma is the Buddhist explanation for an unexplained or unexpected suffering. According to the idea of *karma* in Buddhism, an individual has free will, but he carries the baggage of deeds done in previous lives. Hence Buddhists would say that rather than being created by a Supreme Being, humans actually got themselves born due to *karma* made in past lives. This was made with a particular father and mother with whom we have karmic connections.

Islam teaches that God created human beings and endowed them with immortal souls. Each individual possesses the quality of uniqueness and the duty of each person is to work out his or her own destiny and each is responsible for his or her own action. Hence Islam, in an unexpected contrast to Buddhism, has no soteriology. "Salvation" in its understanding is an irrelevant religious concept which has no equivalent term in the Islamic vocabulary. Man stands in no predicament in which he needs to be "saved".¹⁸ At the birth of man, assuming that he stands on the threshold of ethicality and starts from the zero point of the ethical dimension, Islam conceives his duty as a positive deed, not an undoing of past actions he is unaware of or as a reflection of the current state in the physical world. Moreover, in true Islamic understanding there is no state of "misery" which does not come from God.¹⁹ Poverty is not misery, sickness is not misery, old age is not misery, and even death is not a misery. They are just the various facets of life that all mankind would go through before meeting before their Creator.

¹⁸ See al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), p. 72ff for the detailed discussion on the negation of "soteriology" in Islam.

¹⁹ "Every soul shall have a taste of death: and We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. To Us must ye return." (Qur'an, 21: 35)

The principle of Buddhism soteriology, namely that desire is the root cause of all *dukkha* (suffering), is in itself problematic. This philosophy of Buddhism is self-contradictory because the third truth says “suffering and misery can be removed by removing desire” and the fourth truth says “desire can be removed by following the Eight Fold Path”. For any person to believe in practices related to this concept of soteriology, he should first have the desire to follow the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path. The Third Noble Truth says that desire should be removed. Once desire has been removed, how are we expected to follow the Fourth Noble Truth, i.e. follow the Eight Fold Path unless we have a desire to follow the Eight Fold Path? In short, desire can only be removed by having a desire to follow the Eight Fold Path. If you do not follow the Eight Fold Path, desire cannot be removed. It is self-contradicting as well as self-defeating to say that desire will only be removed by continuously having a desire.

Meditation is also another common feature in the practices of Eastern religions, and Buddhism is no exception to the rule. It is hence another common claim of Buddhism’s adherents that the ideology they hold is a “science of the mind”, as follows:

We can say that *Buddhadharma* is not a religion. It’s a science, a pure and genuine philosophy of humanity and science, which works with the two sides of our samsaric mind, the negative aspect and the positive aspect of our mind. Fundamentally it is the science of working with the very basic nature of our mind.²⁰

²⁰ Buddhism As A Science of Mind [Online Document]

Hence it is also true to say that Buddhism holds that salvation is a personal, individualistic affair, since it is defined in terms of the state of consciousness which can only be a personal affair. It was, however, never widespread among the regular masses in Buddhist-majority communities, who hold mostly to folk religion and have not much appetite for metaphysical speculations. They are more inclined toward pragmatism. Hence in this aspect Islam will have a greater opportunity to spread amongst them, because of its position as *orthopraxies* - the practical religion – and not simply based upon metaphysical speculations.

Buddhists generally believe that by their own actions - by meditation, prayer and the like - they can eventually perfect themselves. The Buddhist initiate had to “*by his own effort in seeking to eradicate desire for continued existence...achieve his own salvation*”.²¹ This view is, of course, empirically false. In the end it is only God that decides. Only He who is perfect can make us perfect. Only He who is just can justify us.

²¹ Anderson, N (Ed.), *The World's Religions*, Grand Rapids (1976), p. 115

V. BUDDHIST ETHICS AND SOCIAL ORDER

5.1 Introduction

Our aim is to review the concept of ethics in Islam and to contrast it with the Buddhist version of what consists of ethics and social order. For that purpose, a short exposition on the concept of man from the Islamic and Buddhist viewpoint would be given, so as to give a clear picture on the situation before we proceed to our analysis of ethics in both religions.

5.1.1 The Islamic Concept of Man

According to Islamic tradition, mankind was created in a state of *fitrah* - the natural disposition of man - and all have the innate recognition that no created entity is worthy of worship, since it is only reserved for God alone (the doctrine of *tauhiyd*)²². This was all part of God's 'design plan'; that the *raison d'être* of man is the desire to know and worship Him.²³ This natural tendency to worship God, however, is damaged by sinful influences from Satan and other social hindrances. The *fitrah* can be supplemented by divine illumination, where God Himself instigates the believer to faith in Him. One who

²² See The Concept of *Tauhiyd* in Islam for a detailed study of this fundamental Islamic doctrine. [<http://www.bismikaallahuma.org>]

²³ "I have not created the jinn and humankind but to serve Me." (Qur'an, 51:56)

has committed an evil deed in the past may repent by asking for forgiveness directly from Him. Indeed, Islam attaches so much importance to the love of God and love of man that it warns against too much of formalism.²⁴ Since man falls under the constant monitorship of God, it commits the Muslim to take space and time seriously in order to fulfill the divine patterns pertinent to that current space and time in which he stands that constitutes his felicity, or his damnation.

5.1.2 The Buddhist Concept of Man

Buddhist tradition naturally concedes that man's current state is based on the cycle of *karma* and its retribution. A person who has committed an evil deed will experience reincarnation after death in horrible forms and damnation to atone for past sins. The world is regarded as evil, and salvation or felicity is understood as its negation, namely as freedom from the world.²⁵ This is done in a variety of fashions depending on the school of Buddhism that is practiced. Hence there is no concept of "repentance", as felicity is understood as climatically an escape *from* the world's damnation. Tradition states that the Buddha established the *sangha*, the religious order of the monks who are made up of the disciples of the Buddha. Hence the *sangha*

²⁵ Ismail Raji' al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), p. 86

²⁴ "It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness - to believe in as Allâh and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and give zakat, to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing." (Qur'an, 2:177)

as a monastic institution became the religious example to laity who lived with family but aspired for the righteous path. The spiritual life of individuals and congregation of the religious order permeated to the rest of the world. The corporate life of the *sangha* became a society of higher order with a disciplined social and religious life and is perceived to have possessed the highest moral and ethical values.²⁶

5.2 The Approach to Ethics and Social Order

Islam's approach to the problems of the world is to emphasize on improving the *homo religious* nature of man, which forms the basis of the *fitrah*. Islamic ethics therefore begins with the identification of the divine purpose in the creation of man. It confirms the fact that though God had created mankind as the best of all creatures²⁷ and as the *khalifah* or vicegerent²⁸ - a term denoting man's stewardship of the earth as a consequence of his being made in the image of God²⁹ - man would have to endure life in this world with all its difficulties

²⁶ Dr. A.S. Nayaka, Buddhist Ethics of Human Values [Online Document]

²⁷ "It is Allâh who granted to you the earth in which to settle, Who raised the sky for your protection, Who formed you in the best of forms, and Who gave you the good things to enjoy. Such are the deeds of your Lord. Blessed be Allâh, Lord of the universes." (Qur'an, 40:64)

²⁸ "It is Allâh Who made you His vicegerents on earth, Who raise some higher than others, that you may prove yourselves ethically worthy. Your Lord is quick of punishment; and He is forgiving and merciful." (Qur'an, 6:165)

²⁹ "And when Allâh perfected the creation of man and breathed into him of His spirit, the angels prostrated themselves to him." (Qur'an, 15:29)

as a test to seek His Pleasure alone with their deeds and actions.³⁰ The very name of the faith, 'Islam', is an active verb, meaning to subject oneself in obedience to the divine commandments and to carry them out. Such a usage would be impossible to relate in English, indeed impossible in Buddhist religious consciousness, as Buddhism's negative soteriology holds that separation from the desires of the world by concentrating on efforts of meditation is an important step towards the path of "enlightenment". Islam recognizes that the body with all its sensuous failings is essential to life, and provides the discipline to harness that is potentially evil to good purpose. This may be done with the ability to differentiate between that which is good and that which is bad.

Thus by setting God's pleasure as the **desirable** objective of man's life, Islam has furnished the highest possible standard of morality. This is bound to provide limitless avenues for the moral evolution of humanity. Indeed, Islam is the only religion on the earth that exhorts man to work and strive for the betterment of oneself on earth, while at the same time exhorts the individual to not ignore his duties

³⁰ "Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere." (Qur'an, 2: 155); "That which is on earth We have made but as a glittering show for the earth, in order that We may test them, as to which of them are best in conduct." (Qur'an, 18: 7); "Every soul shall have a taste of death: and We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. To Us must ye return." (Qur'an, 21: 35); "Verily, in the alternation of the Night and the Day, and in all that Allah hath created, in the heavens and the earth, are Signs for those who fear Him." (Qur'an, 10: 6); "Say: 'Come, I will rehearse what Allah hath (really) prohibited you from: join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want - We provide sustenance for you and for them - come not nigh to shameful deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom.'" (Qur'an, 6: 151)

towards the Creator, as the following hadith demonstrates, “Commit yourself to prayer and worship, as though as you will die the following day, and strive to work hard and gain wealth, as though as you will live for a thousand years.”³¹ Suffering and happiness on earth is seen as two sides of the same coin, both originating from God as a test for mankind, as the Qur’an states: *Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.*³²

In contrast to the above approach that Islam undertakes, Buddhism’s *sine qua non* is to put an end to the seemingly endless cycle of rebirths, of which it sees the Creation as an endless state of suffering or misery in which all human and other life endures. Since the Buddha achieved purity through spirituality by detaching himself from that which is corporeal, the moral dimension does not exist in Buddhism. However, the Buddhist rationale that misery and suffering stemming from desires seems more towards the psychological. As desire is but merely one aspect of man’s natural disposition, one will always desire for the best, but if desire is not fulfilled, one will invariably feel miserable. For that reason misery is merely a **psychological** phenomenon of one’s desire not being fulfilled. In this regard, we would like to refer to Ibn Rushd, or otherwise known as *Averroes* in the Western world, who was quoted to have said, “True happiness for man can surely be achieved through mental and psychological

³¹ Hadith related by al-Bukhari in his *Sahih*.

³² “*Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.*” (Qur’an, 2: 155)

health, and people cannot enjoy psychological health unless they follow ways that lead to happiness in the hereafter, and unless they believe in God and His Oneness.”³³

The only meaningful duty that Buddhism espouses is that man should seek release from the world through rigorous discipline and mental effort.³⁴ Evidently, the only “morality” that can be harmonized with this view is individualistic and world denying.³⁵ Interaction with the world, however, is tolerated for as long as the goal is to achieve total freedom from the clutches of the world, from its *karma*, for the individual alone. A person can therefore be a polytheist or an atheist depending on how he perceives his world, as it does not affect the final outcome or goals of Buddhism. “The Muslim, therefore,” remarks Ismail Raji’ al-Faruqi, “is the diametrical opposite of the *monaster*, whether Buddhist or Christian, who withdraws from other persons precisely in order to work on himself, alone.”³⁶ Although Christian metaphysics was not identical with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, yet in actual practice Christian asceticism and monasticism did not differ from the ascetic attitude of the Hindu and the Buddhist. Life-negating asceticism is a *reductio ad absurdum* of that view of life, which dichotomizes existence into spirit and flesh, or God and the world alienated from Him. If the world and the flesh are the enemies of the spirit, then, to save one’s soul, one should have no truck with them. There is therefore no question why Islam is rightfully called “*din al-fitrah*” - the religion of the *fitrah* - due to its realistic stance on the innate nature of man.

³³ As cited in Ibn Rushd (*Averroes*), kitaabun.co.uk [Online Document]

³⁴ Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 443

³⁵ Ismail Raji’ al-Faruqi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 160

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167

5.3 The Ethics of War

What was the Buddha's attitude to war? The Buddhist would claim that there is no example of the Buddha ever praising war, encouraging war, or going to war himself. On the contrary, they say, he sets an example by being a man of peace and is described in this way:

*Re is a reconciler of those who are in conflict and an encourager of those who are already united, rejoicing in peace, loving peace, delighting in peace, he is one who speaks in praise of peace.*³⁷

On the other hand the Buddhist who is unaware of the circumstances surrounding the Muslim history would join into the chorus of the Orientalists by stating that Islam was a religion of the sword and was spread by the sword. In this regard there is uncanny similarity between what the Buddhists would claim for the Buddha and what the Christians themselves would claim for Jesus, upon whom be peace. Despite the apparent pacifism of the above words ascribed to the Buddha, it did not stop Buddhism's adherents from engaging into wars and conquests. The Sri Lankan Buddhist text, the *Mahavamsa*, presents itself as a historical chronicle describing the various wars and conquests by the Buddhist Sri Lankan dynasty of kings³⁸. In the last century one Zen master actually said, "*Zen and war...extends to the farthest reaches of the holy war, now under way.*" We will touch on historical wars and violence involving Buddhists in the preceding chapters.

³⁷ *Digha Nikaya*, Sutta no. 1

³⁸ Religion In Sri Lanka – Early Buddhism, about.com [Online Document]

Proper use of force can usually take place within a system of law, which is enforced by a legitimate authority. Wars and violence are often the result of a lack of existence of such a system of law and a legitimate authority to enforce it. While Islam does not encourage war, it certainly does nothing to promote it either, even despite its various calls for retaliation if Muslims were to be attacked. This use of force proceeds from love. Before the Prophet^(P), Arabia was inhabited by tribes who were not under any system of law enforced by a legitimate authority. There was no mechanism to settle disputes, which often led to feuds that continued for many generations. The Prophet Muhammad^(P) united these tribes into a single brotherhood so that there may not be any violence, as the Qur'an itself alludes, *And remember the favour of God on you: how you were enemies and He reconciled your hearts so that you became as brothers by the grace of God[.]*³⁹ Thus it is clear that Islam was never a religion of extreme pacifism, but a religion of pragmatism. It allows for action if a certain situation calls for it.

While Buddhist adherents prided themselves on their belief in "non-violence", their holy texts do not reflect such justification. One such example is the following saying attributed to the Buddha, and recorded in the *Dhammapada* as follows:

*Having slain mother and father,
And two warrior kings,
Having destroyed a country,
With its governor,
Ungrieving goes a brahman.*

³⁹ "And remember the favour of God on you: how you were enemies and He reconciled your hearts so that you became as brothers by the grace of God; and how you were at the brink of an abyss of fire and He saved you from it." (Qur'ân, 3:103)

*Having slain mother and father,
And two learned kings,
Having destroyed the five ways of a tiger,
Scatheless goes the brahman.⁴⁰*

A practical understanding of this verse would imply that the Buddha advocates the killing of one's own parents. While we would not debate the merits of the killing of one's own parents, this saying does seem to show that violence in Buddhist texts does not seem to be an alien concept after all. What lacks, however, is the conduct and ethics of war in Buddhism. In this regard, Islam has unveiled a practical solution to a problem that Buddhism was unable to solve despite the fact that it existed at least five centuries before the advent of Islam.

⁴⁰ <http://www.edepot.com/dhamma4.html> [Online Document]

VI. WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

Do not enviously wish for that which Allâh conferred on some and not on others. Men and women, to each belong the deeds they have personally accomplished. Ask Allâh to give you of His bounty. He is knowing of all things. (Qur'an, 4:32)

Traditional Buddhism had always reserved a very lowly position for women in general. Even though women could join the monasteries, there was a secondary (if not menial) status of women. As the Buddha had written to one of his followers, Ananda:

Women are soon angered, Ananda; women are full of passion, Ananda; women are envious, Ananda; women are stupid, Ananda.

That is the reason, Ananda, that the cause, why women have no place in public assemblies, do not carry on a business, and do not earn their living by any profession.

The doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation has been interpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male. One is reborn as a woman because of one's bad *karma*. Thus the subordination of women is given a religious sanction.⁴¹ Even a revered and well-known woman in Buddhism, Queen Malika⁴², was believed to have committed a

⁴¹ Dr. (Mrs.) L.S. Dewaraja, The Position of Women in Buddhism, Buddhist Publication Society [Online Document]

⁴² A daughter of a foreman of the guild of garland-makers in Savatthi, tradition states that at an age of 16 years, she met Siddhatta Gotama in person, who immediately prophesized that she would be the future Queen of Kosala. cf. Helmuth Hecker, Buddhist Women at the Time of The Buddha, Buddhist Publication Society [Online Document]

deed in this life, which had evil results and eventually lead her to the worst rebirth. Immediately after her death, she was reborn in hell, though this lasted only a few days.⁴³ Another figure, Queen Maha Majapati requested personally to the Buddha that she may join his order, but tradition records that Siddhatta Gotama hesitated before giving her permission later on. Commentaries on this incident state that this is due to Indian social mores that spell out salvation for women is through their *bhakti* to the husband.

The Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, records the following experience of one King Dutthagamani and the founding of the city of Khemäräma:

[King Dutthagamani] [a]rrived at Mahiyangana he overpowered the Damila Chatta. When he had slain the Damilas in that very place he came then to Ambatitthaka, which had a trench leading from the river, and (conquered) the Damila Tittamba; fighting the crafty and powerful foe for four months he (finally) overcame him by cunning, since he placed his mother in his view. When the mighty man marching thence down (the river) had conquered seven mighty Damila princes in one day and had established peace, he gave over the booty to his troops. Therefore is (the place) called Khemäräma.⁴⁴

Apparently it is legitimate to use someone's mother as a hostage in Buddhism. The above example certainly raises legitimate questions about Buddhism's regard for women.

⁴³ Helmuth Hecker, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Chapter 25 of the \l "11" *Mahavamsa* [Online Document]

That traditional Buddhism is totally discriminatory towards women is, with little doubt, a common view shared by the pre-Islamic pagan Arab nomads. But the sentiment towards women shared by the pagan Arabs in the period of *Jahiliyyah* with traditional Buddhism does not simply end here. In Thailand it is believed that if a woman gives her body to a monk for sex, she can gain merit, and a prostitute can clear her *karma* by donating money to the temple.⁴⁵ To encourage prostitution, which is defined under the general term *zinâ*⁴⁶, is totally repugnant and condemnable in Islam. It does not lend any credence to Buddhism as a moral force to be reckoned with.

Today there is a blanket discrimination against women in Asian Buddhist societies that have been taken for granted, and largely ignored. In the temples, Buddhist nuns are required to 348 *sikkhapada* (percepts), instead of 248 percepts like their male counterparts. They are also taught to believe that women need to be reborn several times in order to become a man.⁴⁷ This belief permeates all Buddhist societies. In Thailand, a woman is held to be lower or of less “value” than a man. Women are also held to be unclean, and thus should not circumambulate stupas or enter sacred Buddhist sites. It is therefore no wonder that in 1399 A.D., the Queen Mother founded a monastery and commemorated the event in an inscription in which she

⁴⁵ Bhikkhuni Dr. Lee, Clear.html” Getting Clear: Revealing the Myths in Theravada Buddhism [Online Document]

⁴⁶ The Arabic word *zinâ* has no equivalent in English, both “adultery” and “fornication” being of much narrower import.

⁴⁷ From an interview conducted with Chan Kong, a Buddhist nun. See Walking In The Direction of Beauty [Online Document]

requested, “*By the power of my merit, may I be reborn as a male...*”⁴⁸ Such attitude persists till today, and one can only conclude that this is shameful and disgusting, to say the least.

⁴⁸ Quoted by C.J. Reynolds in “*A Nineteenth Century Thai Buddhist Defence of Polygamy and Some Remarks on the Social History of Women in Thailand*”, a paper prepared for the Seventh Conference International Association of Historians of Asia, Bangkok, 22-26 August 1977.

VII. BUDDHISM IN THE WORLD TODAY

How practical or rational is the Buddhist *Weltanschauung*, one may ask? It is true that Buddhism has today managed to establish itself as a world religion. However, Buddhism has never, at any point in history, able to develop itself into a *universal* religion that would dominate over nations and world affairs. This was equally true for the other world religions in the same religious situation after the rise of Christianity and before the advent of Islam, such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Such religions were never intended as a world force to be spread beyond the confines of their own nation or tribe.

In the case of Judaism, it was a national religion confined to only a race of people living in the lands encompassing a Diaspora; and as such could not have possibly disseminated itself to other nations of the world. Zoroastrianism was too a national religion, though not in the same light as Judaism, which held on to cultural and traditional traits of the ancient Persians, and could not be adopted to other people of the world. The same could also be said for Buddhism, which do not possess the salvic spirit of *mission* and was necessary to make a religion universally acceptable.⁴⁹ No doubt that Buddhism did spread in later centuries to China and Japan and South East Asia, as did too Hinduism in the latter, but this was not necessarily because of any salvic spirit of mission. Moreover, Buddhism's traditional influence extended only among the peoples of the tangential regions.

⁴⁹ Syed Muhammad al-Naqib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (ABIM, 1978), p. 92

To say that war and violence are alien concepts to Buddhists is also historically inaccurate. Buddhism throughout history was interwoven with violent wars and conquests. In the last century, Zen Buddhism in particular was responsible for the death of 40 million Asians in World War Two. The Zen master Shaku Soen (1859 1919) orders Buddhists to kill the “evil Christians” in the Russian-Japanese War (1904 1905). He states thus, that “...*the war is not a mere slaughter of their fellow-beings, but that they are combating evil.*” The rape of Nanking is also another incident involving Buddhists, whereby millions of Chinese were raped and tens of thousands of babies killed, either. Zen master Seki Seisetsu on national radio just before the massacre calls for the extermination of ‘red devils’. Another Zen master, Harada Daiun, puts it more succinctly as follows: “*Warriors who sacrifice their lives for the Emperor will not die. They will live forever.*”

Today, traditional Buddhism is no longer appealing for those living in Asia and familiar with its tenets, or the practices of its adherents. In China, for example, the two main Buddhist schools, (a) *Chang-tsung* (or School of Meditation) appeals mostly to intellectual elites, but today they are mostly atheistic but deeply searching for a religion and meaning in life; (b) the *Tsing* school (the “Pure Land”, also called “Great Western Paradise”) which is more popular among common people has degraded today into a form of worship of the Buddha as a heavenly helper, but without much conviction.

It is also true to say that Buddhism has enthused nothing but backwardness in society. Since desire is the root of all suffering in the world, it was unnecessary for one to strive for personal betterment and societal well-being, to simply live as *is*. This has made them

oblivious to the deep pessimism in their outlook towards life. This attitude is prevalent in Buddhist societies or predominantly Buddhist nations. In modern history, there has not been a single Buddhist nation that has adopted the principles of democracy or sustained good governance for a long period. Nearly all the Buddhist nations of today were or are currently being ruled by dictatorships, military juntas or Communist regimes. The ones that do not fall in the above descriptions are influenced by Western secularism, which continuously sees Islam as a challenge to its worldview.

Buddhists in the West would argue that Buddhism has “enticed” the Western intellectuals and scholars to embrace its metaphysical philosophy, and thus this is the evidence for its pragmatic dynamicism and its ethical intellectualism. Their excuse for the common layman’s denigration into deity worship is attributed to ‘tradition’. The understanding of such Buddhists living in the West coincides closely with the formation of what is called “Western Buddhism”. One of the central trends in Western Buddhism is the attempt to integrate Buddhist practice and teaching with Western psychological models. The understanding is that the Buddhism that develops in the West must be free of Eastern hierarchical system. Much of the peculiar baggage of Western Buddhism derives directly from Christian Protestantism. This would include a rejection of the monastic institution, a zeal for reforming and purifying (or reinventing) and distaste for ritual form.

Our response to this argument is that this is simply a logical fallacy of *ad ignoratum*, an appeal to ignorance. It simply reiterates our postulation that whatever understanding is adopted regarding Buddhism, it is still *ipso facto* primarily concerned with the development of an individual and not the society as a whole. As

Buddhism had never the salvic spirit of mission to make it a *universal* religion, it never had the interest of the common layman in mind. Buddhist teachings or ideology was never intended give a clear criteria on what consists of good governance, a proper legal structure or a robust economic system. Hence its so-called “metaphysical philosophy” is invariably made inaccessible to the common layman because it was never *intended* to be made accessible to them. Perhaps Buddhist soteriology has not overseen the problem that the emphasis on meditation or other rigorous mental development may work for some individuals, but not for others.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters we have attempted to point out the dominant ideas that form the basis of Buddhist ethics and social order. We have discussed the historicity of Buddhism and the formation of its traditional texts and canon. We have also shown how Buddhist ethics originally developed out of its extreme pessimism towards life, and regards felicity as the result of an “escape” from the life of this world, which it regards as damnable. We have, however, no way of ascertaining whether this was the correct understanding the Buddha had intended, as the Buddhist writings were only conceived 400 years after the Buddha’s death.

Buddhists living in the West would claim that their belief system is a *haute couture*, an exclusivist philosophical system, one that can only be fully understood and appreciated by only the most “brilliant minds” with a deep spiritual insight. Our response to the claim is that what they perceive as Buddhism’s greatest ‘strength’ is undoubtedly what we see as the weakness of ‘reformed’ (or Western) Buddhism. This ties in with the current state of Western society and its socio-materialist mindset, and explains why the ‘reformed’ Buddhism is popular in such societies while it fails to gain adherents in its traditional socio-religious bastion in Asia. Buddhism’s adherents generate a sense of self-delusion by seeing themselves as “smart, realistic, rational, timeless and mature”, yet they fail to note that resorting to mindless idol-worshipping rituals and the useless, ‘philosophical’ mind-games and speculations does nothing to provide a concrete solution for the society of mankind.

Arguably, it is conceivable to conclude that with such existence of arrogant thought, Buddhism would remain as nothing but a promotion of backwardness. To say that it is excessive in its pessimism of life, and does not encourage its followers to have a better well-being or a change of *status quo* for themselves in this world or the hereafter, is not too far-fetched from the truth. A second 'reformation' is needed for modern Buddhism, one which will learn anew that God did not create this world in jest or that the *a priori* to enlightenment is **not** a life of suffering and misery, but as a stage for the final actualization of His Will, the realization of moral value through man. But its first inspiration and final loyalty must forever belong to the Omnipotent Being, who alone is perfect and transcends all Reality. And that is as far as human knowledge can know of Him and what He has revealed about Himself. Thus, it is our final hope that Buddhists may be able to hear and understand the moving appeal of the Qur'an (3:64): *O' People of the Book! Come now to a fair principle common to both of us, that we shall serve none but God, that we associate naught with Him, and that we do not take one another as lords apart from God.*

IX. APPENDIX: A LIST OF BUDDHIST CANONS

A list of the major Buddhist works as found in the Pali canon (*Tripitaka*). The Mahayana school of Buddhism uses these texts.

Sutta Pitaka

- Digha Nikaya
- Majjhima Nikaya
- Samyutta Nikaya
- Anguttara Nikaya
- Khuddaka Nikaya

Vinaya Pitaka

- Patimokkha
- Khandhaka
- Parivara

Abhidhamma Pitaka

- Dhammasangani
- Vibhanga
- Dhatukatha
- Puggalapannatti
- Kathavatthu
- Yamaka
- Patthana

A list of Buddhist writings found in the Sanskrit canon follows. The Theravada school of Buddhism favors these texts.

- **Mahavastu**

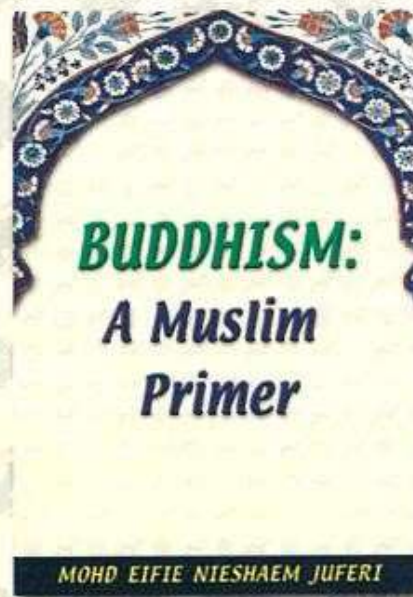
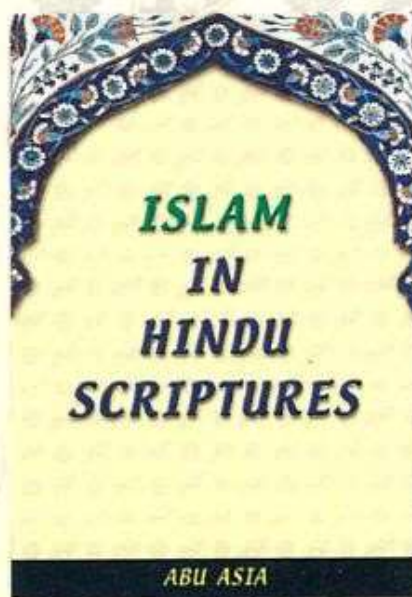
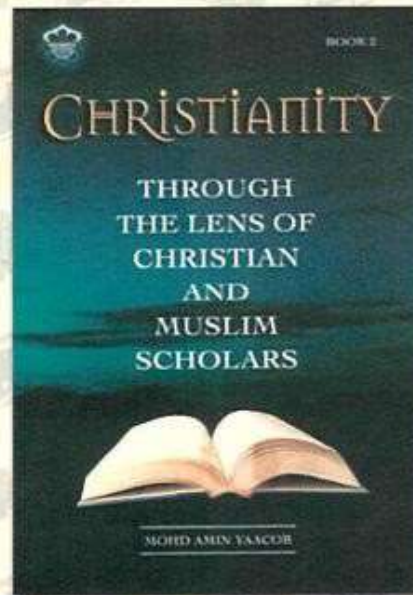
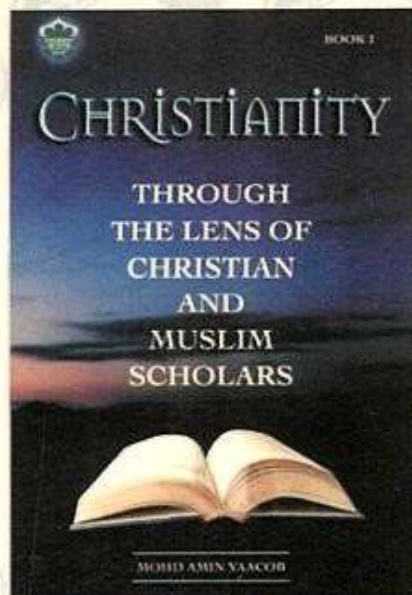
Mahavastu is the most famous work in Sanskrit, which has been restored from its Chinese translation. It consists of voluminous collection of legendary stories.

- **Lalitavistara**

Lalitavistara is one of the holiest of the Sanskrit literature. It belongs to the first century C.E., 500 years after the death of Buddha. It contains the miracles that the superstition-loving people have attributed to Buddha.

A list of major Buddhist writings circulated widely among Chinese Buddhists. They are used in addition to the translated works of the Pali and Sanskrit canon into Chinese, referred to as the *Dà Zàng J_ng* or “Great Treasury Scriptures”.

- Dàb_i Chàn “Great Compassion Penance”
- _mítuó J_ng “Sutra of Amitabha” (“Lesser Sukhavati-Vyuha Sutra”)
- J_ng J_ng “Diamond Sutra” (Vajraccedika-prajña-paramita Sutra)
- Liánhuá J_ng “Lotus Sutra” (Saddharma Pundarika Sutra)
- Liù Z_ Tán J_ng “Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch”
- Wúliàng Shòu J_ng “Sutra of Unlimited Longevity” (“Greater Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra”)
- X_n J_ng “Heart Sutra” (Mahaprajñaparamita-hridaya Sutra)
- Yào Sh_ J_ng “Sutra of the Master of Medicine”



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